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ABSTRACT

The paper considers various aspects of the education of mentally retarded children. It is noted that the percentage of those retarded children who profited from special care during their whole youth is so small that it does not allow generalization of an educational system. The future aim is seen as the incorporation of retarded adults into the society. (Author/SBH)

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Challenges and Limits in Education for the Severely and Profoundly Retarded

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Up to the early forties of our century there was little scientific interest in the field of mental retardation and as a consequence, the problems of mentally retarded children were not considered within the realm of education. In recent years the idea of special education has spread over our western civilization. There is no discussion about its necessity. The average western citizen knows that education must be specialised and must start early. Parents as well as conscientious educators are anxious not to miss anything. Intervention everywhere and in every field is a modern phenomenon. The field of mental retardation is not spared in this respect either. The great insecurity of our times lies very deep and this may be the cause why parents often bring quite young babies to the specialist. But it is precisely with the very young that we must exercise the greatest caution. However well intentioned we may be, we must avoid the temptation to jump any steps of normal development by overtraining or overfeeding the child. We must constantly point to the course of normal development so that no more is expected from the mentally handicapped child than from a normal child of the same age. It is precisely the most loving mother and the most enthusiastic therapist who are in the greatest danger of making this mistake and of applying so-called "purposeful exercises" to infants who are not even in Kindergarten

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age. Here we face the urgent need for more efficient collaboration between research and education in future.

The number of educators concerned with the education of the young retaried child is growing year by year. Different as those people are, there must be one special characteristic common to all educators, the pioneer spirit. This is a challenge for everybody who hates routine work and is attracted by the adventure of searching for new ways. But this situation has its disadvantages in the fact, that most of the educational problems of young retarded children are not definitely settled. The percentage of those who had the opportunity to profit from a preschool training is very low.

The question is open: When is the best time to start the preschool training and under which circumstances? Here too we must point to the course of normal development. The primary tutor of a child is its mother. The family is the natural soil for the development of a child. The average child learns to master the numerous challenges of every day life by participating in its mother's life. Likewise, for the mentally handicapped infant -- the mother is master instructor. All infants learn the variety of skills and rules of behaviour just for one person's sake. So the retarded child too has to experience for whose sake it has to be so obedient, so patient, so nice. Emotional satisfaction with one single person will be the reward for the child for all his efforts to renounce activities that are not fitting in the social context of his environment. Can early therapy bring help if the child is frustrated by an abrupt or too long absence of the only person with whom it has an emotional contact? The normal development of a child includes a period

where the child is not able to have social contact with several persons or with children of its own age. This period is longer in the case of a retarded child, because obviously not only is the intelligence retarded but the whole personality, including the social development. The mentally retarded child will remain in some kind of a "presocial period" for quite a while; it will not long for companionship with others of the same age and is not prepared to be part of a group. To put a retarded child in a group of children in a period of its life when its personality has not reached the level of social adaptation will have a negative influence of its human relationships.

Of course, it is particularly necessary to systematically offer the young retarded child those opportunities for activity which he cannot create spontaneously for himself. Parents cannot be expected to invent the entire method of educating retarded children by themselves. It is the task of the specialised educator to help the parents to proceed more systematically and thus more successfully. This educational service for young children with the collaboration of the mother needs to be developed in the future. The mother must actively participate in the play activities of the retarded baby and must be aware of the educational value of these activities. However, the time will come when the child must be given the experience that it is possible to have a pleasant time without the mother. Only by adapting the therapy to the individual rhythm of life can we help the retarded child to reach the level of social adaptation which permits its integration in a group of children and allows it to enjoy pre-school education.

The children in our schools are the first generation of retardates who are receiving a systematic special education and the number of those mentally handicapped persons who profited from special care during their whole lifetime is so small that it does not allow generalization of an educational system nor definite solution of educational problems. By looking forward to improvements in future special education, it is important to summarize our actual situation and to compare our educational results. The difficulty of this task derives from the endless variety of educational environment and of special educational methods.

Overemphasis of one particular method seems to be rather harmful in education because the method can become an end in itself. Looking out for the future, we must realize that one-sided emphasis of an educational principle or methodistic device necessarily creates an imbalance in education. As far as we can summarize the efforts of the last decade the things that survive are not instructional method, but the passionate personality of the educator. No rules or dogmas, no single method can evoke the development of a handicapped child, nothing but the understanding devotion to a specific, unique child. When we consider questions of methods, major attention must be given in the future for the development of the personality of the educator and of his mental health. Here we encounter a multiplicity of questions which are beyond the limits of our panel.

The experiences of the last four decades showed us the limits of our democratic ideal of education: the same school for every child. This wonderful idea could not work, because children are not the same even if they are sent to the same school. The less-gifted child who

was not able to reach the average goal of his class was condemned to be the loser during his entire childhood. Being continuously overstrained, many of the retarded children reacted with behaviour difficulties or escaped from their personal tragedies into a neurosis. It is good to recall this situation precisely now when we are on the point of discussing the problem of integrating the mentally retarded child in normal schools. We must find the appropriate solution to two problems: one coming from the limitation of the child and the other coming from the limits of the environment. The discussions about this topic, often very emotional, are in danger of mixing up the starting point and the goal. Of course, the aim is the integration of the handicapped child in the average social setting. In order to reach this goal, we must find special settings for the child according to the special circumstances and possibilities. I hope that in future planning these two aspects will not form two contradictory philosophical backgrounds.

In special classes mentally retarded children have the opportunity to adapt the learning process to their individual rhythm and to remain at a specific level until they can master the task. Each task is split into its constituent parts to make it possible to concentrate attention on one single difficulty. There is a positive change in education if we only expect the achievement of which the child is capable. By guiding the child from success to success, the total personality can be influenced for the good.

The most important goal of special education is to teach the child social behavior and emotional control. Only in company of other children can the child learn these capabilities. The educational system of one-

teacher one-child may be useful for a limited time in order to overcome a single difficulty, but it does not seem to be a possible basis for future education. Even by decreasing the number of the children in one group, there is a limit below which group influence and exercise in social adaptation is no longer possible.

By the integration of handicapped children in the society of healthy ones many questions arise. It is the task of the future to find out which are the spheres where education can be common? Which are the occupations that can be shared? How is it possible to integrate without overstraining the handicapped child? Where are the limits to safeguard the natural right of the healthy child? How far is integration in accordance with the wish of the retardates and not mainly a projection of our own idea?

These questions are of even greater importance in the period of adolescence. The problem of the mentally retarded is not solved with childhood training, for childhood is only one phase of life. Although the most important one, it is nevertheless the shortest span of life. Social rehabilitation is a continuous process from birth to death and problems of adjustment must be considered throughout the whole education. The more the retarded is integrated in the average daily life of a community, the more will he experience his limits.

When the retarded is grown up he has a vague notion of being different from others. Certainly very few are able to grasp the full significance of their handicap, but they feel that in some way they are different from the other young people of their age. With this feeling, they share the suffereing which is the lot of every handicapped person.

The individual has to accept the fact of his handicap as a part of his life. We cannot free the young person from the resulting suffering, but we can reduce it. The tragedy of the retarded adolescent is not his handicap as such, but the fact that he is not accepted and is deprived of the respect which every human being needs for happiness.

In our society even a mentally handicapped person can only be satisfied if he has a vocational occupation. There is an urgent need to increase the number of special training workshops and to raise their educational level. In spite of careful training only a small percentage of the mentally retarded can find employment on the free market. New ways had to be found for the others. The solution lies in the provision of "sheltered workshops" in which mentally handicapped can be employed for unlimited periods of time. We do not want the mentally retarded to become robots, stunted by monotonous, primitive work. On the other hand, we wish to avoid any unrealistic idylls in which grown-up people spend their days producing useless trifles which then have to be sold at charity bazaars. In serious work, the criteria of productivity must be paramount. The sheltered workshop of the future should be neither a factory nor an institution for occupational therapy but something between the two. This is not easily achieved, but we must search for new ways and new solutions to the various problems.

We must not forget that we are the first generation confronted with the problems of adult retarded persons. Actually, we are watching the development of the first generation of retardeds who have received a systematic special education. As a result of adapted physical and mental hygiene and as result of medical improvement, the life expectancy of

handicapped persons is longer. It is very likely that the average retarded will survive his parents.

Here we face a variety of new problems. What is to happen to an adult retarded son or daughter when the aged parents are no longer able to care for them or when they are carried off by death? In the near future, we must organize homes for mentally retarded adult women and men, where they can live as in a boarding house, and get the care they need. In each house, some of the inhabitants are part of the home-economic team and the others are going outside to work. The director and the staff of the houses are also concerned with the leisure time of the inhabitants, helping them in music, arts or physical training. We must be careful to avoid creating ghettos for handicapped persons by organizing big institutions which are able to meet all their needs, except the urgent need of social contact with the average world. Therefore, these future homes are better in small houses, located in different residential areas of the city. This has the advantage that they are well known and accepted in their neighborhood.

The future aim is that these mentally retarded adults should be incorporated into human communities. Our primary concern is not the utilization of idle working capacity for the sake of the national economy. Neither Switzerland nor any other western country is so poor that they cannot support their mentally retarded citizens. Those who would see this as the main reason for the efforts made on behalf of the handicapped are closely related to those who propagate the theory of "the life not worth living". Man is worth not only what he produces but what he is. By belonging to the productive world, these, its weakest members are integrated

into our society. Thus, they achieve an existence worthy of a human being. This is the future aim of rehabilitation of the mentally handicapped.

This is the supreme aim of all our thinking, all our activity and care for the mentally retarded - to help him to attain an existence worthy of human beings. Because, in spite of all mental handicaps, in spite of poverty of self-expression, even the weakest of us belongs to that species, endowed with its own dignity and its own beauty which is called MAN.

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Abstract

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Challanges and Limits in Education for the Severely and Profoundly Retarded

In recent years there is no discussion that education must be specialised and must start early. The question is open when is the best time to start and under which circonstances? Here we face the urgent need for collaboration between research and education. The percentage of those retarded children who profited from special care during their whole youth is so small that it does not allow generalisation of an educational system. Social rehabilitation is a continuous process from birth to death. We are the first generation confronted with problems of adult retarded persons. The futur aim is that these adults should be incorporated in our society in order that they achieve an existence worthy of a human being.